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Source: *Arthuriana*, SPRING 2015, Vol. 25, No. 1, Special Issue on Cinematic Re-imaginings of Arthurian Literature (SPRING 2015), pp. 3-4

Published by: Scriptorium Press

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/24643425

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King Arthur in the Twenty-First Century: *Kaamelott*, BBC's *Merlin*, and Starz's *Camelot*

TARA FOSTER AND JON SHERMAN

While cinematic re-imaginings of medieval Arthurian narratives have received much attention from scholars, television adaptations—with an equally impressive spectrum of co-opted Arthurian characters, motifs and plots—have not seemed to generate similar academic interest. The past ten years have seen two long-running and successful series based on the legends of King Arthur—Alexandre Astier's *Kaamelott* (2005–2009) and the BBC's *Merlin* (2008–2012)—as well as Starz's prematurely cancelled *Camelot* (2011).

This special issue explores these three programs from a number of angles. In the first two essays, Tara Foster and Cédric Briand both analyze the much-adored French *Kaamelott*. Foster demonstrates that in his portrayal of Arthur's court, Astier deliberately creates something akin to the multicultural world of his contemporary spectators, permitting them to make a more direct connection between the show's fictional world and their own. Briand examines the conflict between Lancelot and his king, a conflict that underscores the dysfunctional nature of the court and is the source for both the humor and the tragedy of the series. In the next two essays, the female figures in the BBC's *Merlin* and Starz's *Camelot* become the focus. Cindy Mediavilla traces the progression of Morgan le Fay from a figure that is trivialized or caricatured—complete with outlandish costumes and mannerisms—to one that is fully developed and humanized, while Jennifer Edwards argues that despite paying lip service to feminist ideas about women's empowerment, both shows offer narratives that ultimately reinscribe patriarchal values. In the final three essays, Jon Sherman, Erin Chandler, and David Tollerton focus on the BBC's *Merlin*. Sherman highlights the dynamic tensions created through audience background knowledge and viewer expectations clashing with the series' Arthurian innovations. Chandler shows that *Merlin* co-opts not only superficial elements of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but also its underlying structure to examine the program's central themes of family and

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familial conflict. Tollerton points to the central role of Uther's war on magic as a reflection of the concerns of *Merlin*'s target audience.

Although each of the three series has come to an end, Astier's output is ongoing: an eighth companion graphic novel was released in 2014, and he has planned both a movie trilogy and a collection of short stories to link *Kaamelott* to the trilogy. Despite the ever-expanding corpus of Arthurian television adaptations, the number of scholarly treatments of these adaptations is decidedly smaller than those of Arthurian films. The essays in this special issue seek to redress the imbalance between scholarship on Arthurian film and Arthurian television. Norris J. Lacy's comment that 'we should all be devoting more attention to texts other than those that have long occupied—and obviously still occupy—the center of the canon' could just as easily be applied to film, the center of the audiovisual Arthurian canon, versus television, which still occupies a marginal position in that canon.[1] His suggestion that 'productive study of the lesser-known texts, medieval or modern, enables us both to reevaluate those texts and also develop a more subtle appreciation of the "masterpieces" against which we inevitably measure them' concisely summarizes the purpose of this special issue.[2] Its editors hope that these essays not only contribute to the available research on Arthurian television, but that they also inspire and encourage others to continue to examine the growing number of incarnations of Camelot on the small screen. As the popularity of *Kaamelott*, *Merlin*, and *Camelot* prove, the Arthurian legends remain as productive as ever, suggesting a promising future for the once and future king.

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NOTES

1 Norris J. Lacy, 'Arthurian Research in a New Century: Prospects and Projects,' in *New Directions in Arthurian Studies*, ed. Alan Lupack, Arthurian Studies LI (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), p. 16 [pp. 1–20].

2 Lacy, 'Arthurian Research in a New Century,' pp. 16–17.

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